

Wald Interview Transcript

PSB: What made you want to take the subject on knowing that very few accounts of this were the same?

EW: You know that was actually what got me fascinated. What happened was that I had just been, I had read Bruce Jackson. Bruce Jackson wrote a book called *The Story Is True*, about folklore and myths. And he treated the whole story of Dylan getting booed at Newport as a myth. And I ended up in an online list of music historians mentioning that, and a bunch of people said, "No, he did get booed." And we went back and forth for a while and this happened to be in February a couple of years ago just as people were calling me for interviews about The Beatles' arrival fifty years earlier. And it just hit me if I could sort out a version of the Dylan story that was interesting in time for the 50th anniversary, I could sell a book. And I'm a freelance writer, I like to sell books. So that was really the spur. And then, as I guess always happens, once I started researching it, I just got fascinated. Not even so much in that night, just in how much I hadn't understood about the way the whole story developed.

It's funny that's how you got into it 'cause I communicated with Bruce Jackson as well right around the time *No Direction Home* was coming out, and basically he said, "Did you ever see *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*? Print the myth."

Right. That's his go to point for that one. Yeah, you know, I understand "print the legend" and I don't expect this book (laughs) to end the fact that people are gonna keep printing the legend. But I also like to investigate the legend. And, as I say, you know I'm a historian, and one of the interesting things about any project is once you go back to primary sources, all sorts of things start catching your eye that you had never thought about. I mean including just odd little things. Dylan's fascination with black folksingers. I mean all the biographies mention Odetta 'cause he's always mentioned her, but if you, you know, I thought gee, I wonder where he's doing any other. You know once I'd seen her and Walter Conley, the guy in Denver, I thought, "huh" and just started looking at the repertoire Dylan had recorded on his early tapes, and glancing around, and there's a Leon Bibb album, where one of the first Dylan tapes has half the songs off of one Leon Bibb record. It's like okay, that's interesting. That makes sense. Or odd little things, I just thought you know, what the hell, we hear that he kept filching Jon Pankake and Paul Nelson's records, let's look at what records they were reviewing right then. And I find this record called *Folk Festival At Exodus*, which again he pulled a bunch of songs off of and then heads to Denver to ask to play at the Exodus. I get fascinated by this stuff! (laughs) But it isn't just minutiae. It's also I think he had a really genuine fascination with black people and the more general idea of being an outsider. I mean none of this

is news. But the minutiae fills out that story, just like finding the discussion of Bill Moore on the Studs Terkel Show. I mean we've all heard the Studs Terkel Show. I don't know why nobody else bothered to look a little deeper and figure out that they were talking about Bill Moore who he was also mentioning at the same time in his Newport thing. But that was interesting because that then shows where "Only A Pawn" comes out of and the thing that got him booed at the ECL dinner of sympathizing with Lee Harvey Oswald and you get a pattern. So it's stuff like that. Plus I'd never listened to all the *Freewheelin'* which, you know I'm a blues player. So I was *fascinated* to find that he'd been recording a blues album that I never knew about.

I like what you wrote about "Only A Pawn In Their Game," and years ago, I used to do radio, and I was doing a radio show at the University of Pennsylvania and I did a thing on Topical Songs of the '60s. And of the things I did was compare "Only A Pawn In Their Game" to Phil Ochs' "Too Many Martyrs." And basically I said, one is like saying Medgar Evers was a great guy, too bad they killed him, and the other one is going like into the whole thing of the South, and growing up in the South, and the culture of the South. And that was to me basically the difference between Dylan and most of the other singer songwriters at the time in the Village was he just, he somehow saw through all this stuff and got to some deeper level.

Yeah. My inclination always – it probably is obvious in this book is try to not take sides.

Right.

I mean I understand the value of both of those songs. Which I prefer personally is a separate question. Not that I don't have opinions about that stuff. My opinions can drive my friends crazy, but I try – you know I really think it's more interesting as an exercise to try to understand why everybody's doing what they're doing what they're doing.

Right. One of the things I liked about the book was you just presented Bob as a rock and roller from the very beginning. You know, when he was a kid and then going to the University of Minnesota where he really started to learn about folk music. And I really liked that aspect and that view because it made the book not the same old thing as a million other Dylan bios.

I honestly have to thank Peter Stampfel to a great degree for that. I mean Stampfel was the one – I quote him saying that when he first saw Dylan onstage right after Dylan arrived in New York, it was like this bolt of lightning saying that you could sing old time music like it was rock and roll.

And my first reaction was, “*Really* Peter? It doesn’t sound that way to me and then I went back and listened and he was absolutely right.

Back to the night in question, do you think Dylan’s decision to play the Evening Concert with a band was as spontaneous as it’s made out to be?

Yes.

Okay.

I can’t believe if it had not been that spontaneous, he wouldn’t have actually rehearsed a band a little more than that. I mean all you have to do is listen to Jerome Arnold’s bass playing, and you can believe it was as spontaneous as they say it was.

My main reason for asking that is that he must have brought a Stratocaster to Newport.

Not necessarily. I mean *really* not necessarily. You know, Answer 1: Not necessarily. He really cared so little for that Stratocaster that he left it on the airplane. Answer 2: He was in the middle of recording his electric session. Carrying around a guitar to fool around on, when you’re in the middle of recording an electric session would not be surprising at all. I mean I do that all – right now I have to do a Carter Family tribute thing at the end of the month, and wherever I go, I have an autoharp. Not because I plan to play it at any of my Dylan events. But in between my Dylan events, I’ll be back in the hotel room or wherever I am playing and practicing autoharp.

Do you think as Peter Yarrow sort of says in the book that Dylan misjudged his audience?

I don’t think he cared very much. But I think that, I mean, I don’t know. But first of all, the set was really disorganized. And I don’t think he expected it to be that disorganized. My guess is considering that when he had been onstage Saturday afternoon, everybody had been screaming for him to play “Like A Rolling Stone.” And that’s definitely what the crowd is screaming for at the afternoon thing. I would think that he would have expected a lot of people in the crowd to be absolutely thrilled that he was doing that. And honestly I think it’s an open question. If he had simply hit the stage and done a hot three electric songs, with you know if the sound had been on top of it and everything, I have no idea what would have happened. I know that some people would have been upset. But the people who were excited would have been more excited. And that could have tipped the balance in a very different way. So I don’t know. I think Pete Seeger would have been

equally upset either way. But the way it was, even I think some people who would have, who could potentially have been excited by the set weren't.

I can go with that. I mean there's other people who've talked about it, Geoff Muldaur for example has been quoted as saying "It just wasn't good."

Right, Geoff says it was just lousy and Geoff also says that he was standing far enough back that the problem was just not the mix upfront. Geoff is a man of strong opinions, and he holds to them, and I agree with a lot of them and not all of them. I have no idea what I would have thought had I been there. And I have no idea how accurate anybody's memory is. A perfect example of that, and I didn't end up using this in the book, but I have a friend who was there at age 15 and who clearly remembers loving Dylan's electric set. But also clearly remembers that he had back home his acoustic guitar on which he scrawled an X through Dylan's face on the picture had of Dylan on the inside cover 'cause he was so angry about Newport. So he has both the memory of loving it and the memory that he clearly must have hated it. (laughs)

I can understand that and I think even when *Bringing It All Back Home* came out and before that the single of "Subterranean," it was a shock. Even though all indications if you were paying attention to what Dylan was doing was that he was moving towards rock and roll.

Yeah and also you know people felt special about Dylan. And it's - you know, part of what I was trying to convey in this book is just that the extent to which this had bigger meaning than just what it sounded like. I mean that's why I was so pleased to have that scrapbook that I quote from Herb Van Dam and Judy Landers who love all the pop-folk. They love Peter, Paul and Mary, they love all that stuff. And yet, Dylan for them is selling out for them because Dylan is just supposed to be something different. Which was a hell of a weight for him to carry, but that's part of the story.

And speaking of that, one of the other things I enjoyed about the book was when you did go into the whole thing of The Weavers and to an extent Pete Seeger did it too, you know the thing of changing folksongs to sort of make them commercial, though that may not have been everybody's intent.

Well, I mean they certainly - you know The Weavers with Gordon Jenkins' arrangements, that sure as hell was the intent. I mean The Weavers - Pete Seeger has always been absolutely explicit that the whole idea of The Weavers was to become commercial stars, to have that power to then use for good rather than evil. But he always has framed The Weavers not as something he did for artistic reasons, but as something he did because he

realized that the fact that he was just out on the fringes and couldn't draw a paying audience was limiting his effectiveness. And The Weavers were gonna be his way to become a star and hence more effective. And what's so crazy about that story is that it worked.

Yeah, I agree. But the crazy thing is it also, the way you just framed it, it also fits in with his whole political thing.

Sure. But it fits in with his political thing in somewhat different ways than the usual framing of him as sort of a head in the skies saint, who was not selling himself with the world. And gets us a bit more in Pete as someone who not only had politics, but had a sense of tactics. And he did brilliantly. All you had to do was see him onstage and you could see that.

Right. Well, I saw both him and The Weavers, but I didn't see The Weavers with him.

But I mean you know, one of the huge problems with Pete as a story and one of the things that I tried to deal with somewhat in this book, but it's always hard is that we tend to understand music history by listening to it, in the 20th Century at least, by listening to records. And what Pete did on a stage is not on the records. You know I love that Jon Pankake thing comparing him to Williams Jennings Bryan, but it's not crazy. I mean he just had that live magic, that it's I think it's very hard, you know it just isn't there on the recordings I mean making the case for what was so great about Pete Seeger who never saw him live, they have to take it on faith because there's no way you can prove it.

Yeah, I'd say in a lot of ways the closest he got to capturing it was the *We Shall Overcome* Carnegie '63 release.

Yeah, that's a, you know, I like that record a lot. But keep in mind, you or I when we listen to that record remember seeing Pete live. Saying to someone who never saw Pete live, listen to this, you'll hear how great he was live, they don't. I mean some love the record. I'm not saying - you know I can put together a collection of really good Pete Seeger stuff. I think the man was a *terrific* musician in a lot of ways. But the magic is a different, is another story.

Yeah, well, when he passed, I'm friends with somebody who's involved with Sony Legacy Records, and I was like, if you put together a Seeger comp, I want to be involved, 'cause I, there were just certain things that he did for Columbia, one of the albums was *I Can See A New Day*, and his playing on "The Bells Of Rhymney" on that particular record, it just takes it further for whatever reason than a lot of, than the other ten versions of the songs he cut.

As I say, there were a bunch of great things I was really pleased when they did release the double CD set with the complete Carnegie Hall concert. That was terrific. In any case, I mean he changed my life. I mean I did see him live onstage and it's one of the things, you know Dave Van Ronk used to say, "One of the things that makes me glad I'm old is the things I got to see when I was young."

Well, I think we share that some experience 'cause he was what pretty much got me started on music. And then as I got older and things changed, and obviously Dylan was a big part of that, it was the same thing as one of the people in the book says, "You know like I realized, Pete Seeger's my parents, Dylan's me."

Yeah, yeah sure. But you know, as we've gotten older, I think most of us also developed different levels of sympathy without them.

Oh right. I can on one hand see all the complaints about The Weavers, who I liked, actually liked better than the Kingston Trio and Peter, Paul & Mary and all that stuff. But at the same time, my argument about them is nobody else sang with the kind of spirit that they put out.

I'm a fan. I mean hell, I'm a fan of the Rooftop Singers. Not like I am of Mississippi John Hurt, but you know. It's a big world. I can like both.

Well, I agree with that. And you know so my basic point in all of this is kind of as much as I and probably you ended up going to the more traditional source as we discovered more and more music, you could still like both.

Yeah, and you know I went both ways. I mean I did something last year on Katy Perry. I mean I have nothing against mainstream pop. The values are different. You know all these things have - but you know another part of all this is I try, like I said earlier, I try as much as possible when I'm working as a historian to try to understand which I think is the opposite exercise from judging. And I feel like one of the problems with a lot of music history is that what people call music history is actually music criticism. And music criticism is every bit as valuable as music history, but it's a different process. And the whole point of music criticism is judging how something has held up in the present. Which is the opposite of understanding why people thought about it the way that they did in the past.

Back again to the festival, I found that the cast of characters in the book, especially the people who were involved in the festival all

along, the Board of Directors was quite interesting, and it seemed like George Wein was kind of the voice of reason.

I think that's appropriately said, yeah. No, I mean George was constantly from the beginning the person saying guys, you know, yeah, that's great. On the other hand, (laughs).

Well, you know just the whole thing of everybody wanting to kick Grossman out of the festival and he's going "Hold on a second."

Yeah. I mean that's an interesting story to me because when I first read that, I was a little dubious, and I still don't know 100 percent sure that it's true, but apparently it's true. I've since heard that somebody has told me that Pete told them that story too. I asked Peter Yarrow and George Wein and both of them, I was interested to hear both of them saying, "I don't remember, but it makes sense to me. You know it sounds right." But I mean Lomax, you know Alan Lomax was an incredibly important, incredibly brilliant, incredibly significant and incredibly difficult man.

The more I read and find out about him, the more complex he becomes.

Yeah.

All the stuff you point out about him about doing the shows and bringing on rock acts in 1959 at a folk show. It's outrageous.

Yeah, exactly. I mean he's trying to bring on The Cadillacs. And his whole point was if you want folk music in New York, folk music in New York is the doo wop guys in Harlem, not a bunch of college kids with banjos. It was completely consistent with his broader position. It's just not the way people, you know people want to simplify his broader position and I don't mean people in general. There was a war that happened in the '60s going into the '70s of a bunch of rock critics who were trying to write intelligently about rock and roll in a world where a lot of the gatekeepers considered rock and roll stupid, and folk music intelligent. And a lot of them never got rid of the chip on their shoulder from that period. And like to think of the whole folk world as essentially liking insipid music and hating rock and roll. And so you know, Lomax, the whole idea of purism gets lumped into that, when in fact Lomax's purism was a very, very different kind of purism. He was a purist, but he was a purist in a way much more the way Greil Marcus in a purist, than in the way people who don't want to hear anything from after 1920 are purists.

Where I'm coming from actually is - and the more I think about it, it's probably what led me into this whole kind of music, but my mom

went to Bryn Mawr with Bess Lomax Hawes and they were friends. My mom passed away when I was a kid, so I never got to meet Bess Lomax Hawes, but I've seen letters and stuff. And the older I got, I felt this had to be the germ that started the whole thing 'cause I grew up in, there weren't a lot of records, but there were the Almanac Singers 78s, and a Leadbelly album, and a couple of Seeger albums and some Weavers albums etcetera. So that's how I got into it and had and still have my original copy of the Leadbelly bio that Alan Lomax and his father wrote. Along with a record that my mom got in either the late '50s with Alan Lomax and Peggy Seeger and Guy Carawan. And if I ever get to interview Dylan, I'm bringing that record with me 'cause there's about five or six songs on that record that he either quoted from or did.

That makes sense. Was it on Tradition?

It was on Kapp.

English label?

No, American label. But it did come out in England, I found a lot of it on youtube, from an English record.

It was recorded in England.

It possibly was recorded in England.

One of the basic interesting things about Dylan's story is that you know if he hadn't been around Pankake and Nelson in Minneapolis, most of the people in New York had never heard those Tradition Records. It's the one thing where Minneapolis was in a sense the hip place in America, was when it came to all those English imports.

One of the things about Dylan that a lot of the folkies didn't seem to realize, and this didn't necessarily happen in the '60s, but it really happened later when he started revisiting folksongs from '88 on, he started turning on a lot of kids to a lot of music

Oh absolutely.

that they wouldn't have known about, just by singing the songs and by this time, the Internet was happening and so people would start discussing The Stanley Brothers or whoever.

With his podcast and all, yeah absolutely. No, I mean that's one of the things that's so funny about all of this and you know I don't hit it over the

head, but I do talk about it briefly right at the end of the book is by now everybody thinks of Dylan as a patron saint of roots music. I mean everybody now associates, I mean any young person now associates Dylan with old fashioned music. And you know with good reason, that he's been, obviously the new Sinatra one is an extreme example in a way, but, but no, it's you know the idea that Dylan is a rejection of folk music is ridiculous including that particular night at Newport. I mean what Dylan was rejecting, whatever it was, was not folk music.

No, it was more the other stuff that came along with it in a sense.

Well, it's important to remember that there was a world of purists who Dylan came out of, like the Little Sandy people, who hated Baez and Peter, Paul & Mary and all of that and considered it not folk music. And who liked the electric Dylan stuff. I mean that's one of the things - again, I don't hit this over the head, but I do try to sort of say it in the book. I mean people completely misunderstand if they think that the hardcore purists were the ones who were upset. The ones who were upset were the Peter, Paul & Mary fans. I mean there were hardcore purists who had never liked Dylan. But the hardcore purists who liked early Dylan tended to like, you know he himself said that. I mean that's one of the quotes that when I found it, I was like yeah that makes sense was him saying, "I don't think the people who were upset were my early fan. My early fans are still with me. It's the people who just found out about me in the last couple of years." And I think that's right. You know it was the people whose idea of Bob Dylan was "Blowin' In The Wind." Not the people whose idea of Bob Dylan was "Highway 51."

Well, in my case, in '63 my dad took me to a Pete Seeger concert that was actually my third one. It was right around the time of the Carnegie Hall show, so he was doing all those songs, "Hard Rain" and "Davey Moore" and all the freedom songs. And I absolutely, I was like 11 or about to be 12 and I couldn't help but notice "Hard Rain." And then I went away to camp and my brother went to a different camp, and he came home from camp which happened to be coincidentally happened to be the same camp that Suze Rotolo had gone to a few years before and started telling me about this guy, Bob Dylan. And that summer of course Blowin' In the Wind had been a big hit, but it was on Top 40, so the djs never talked about who wrote the songs. And that's how it started. And we didn't get the first Dylan album until like a year later, where I think I heard "Baby, Let Me Follow You Down" on some folk radio show, and I just went, "I didn't know he could play guitar like that." And we went out and got that record, and then it just kept going. And discovering that whole record was a whole different thing than *Freewheelin'*.

Right which again, it's very, very hard I think for people who came along later to understand that most people discovered, you know most people heard Dylan songs before they knew who Dylan was. That fuel is so foreign for people even five years younger than you, but certainly people ten, 20, 30, 40, 50 years younger than you. 'cause they all had heard of Dylan before they heard the music. And you know, it's different.

Are you aware that when Dylan returned to Newport in 2002, the day the show was announced, he was on tour, I think it was Germany, and he played with his band an acoustic version of "Maggie's Farm?"

I didn't know that. That's funny.

So it's one of those things were like, he does these funny little things, he gives the impression of he's not paying attention, and he is paying attention, if you read the signs.

I mean you know the temptation to interpret, I kept, I don't escape it completely, but I tried to back off as often as I could because boy, do I feel that temptation.

Actually, that was one of the things I really liked about the book, because you just went right up, you had your thing, the chapter on Pete, and then you had the chapter on Dylan, and I was really impressed that you managed to do it and stay away from all that. And you just, you just basically wrote about the music. I mean you had to mention a couple of songs here and there. But you basically kept the focus on the music. And you continued that through the whole book and that's why it's different than a lot of the other books on Dylan.

Yeah, well clearly that was, you know I just sort of felt like there'd been all these discussions for all this time, and they don't all agree with each other but they were all discussing the same thing. Let's discuss something else for a while. And you know obviously, I also think that that's one of the advantages of the focus that I had by just thinking about that night, 'cause whatever it was that made Dylan decide to go electric, it wasn't the poetry. So I'm not disagreeing with anyone who says the poetry is the most important thing about Dylan. That's a perfectly reasonable opinion. But it's not the most important thing about Dylan for this story. And I think it's an interesting story because god damn it, one of the things that's fascinating, you know, the thing in a way that I will take away from this project is I had never really gotten into the late what for some people is golden era of Dylan with *"Love And Theft."* When I first hear them, I just went okay, whatever. And this project, I went back to them and just completely fell in love with them and I just listen to them over and over and over and you know, that's a

gift. That's really exciting for me to discover something new that I like that much. And it just reminded me, you know he talks about that in *Chronicles*, and I never, I enjoyed *Chronicles*. But one of the things I found most striking in it is that moment where he's sort of saying you know, "I couldn't write like I used to write, I didn't have that magic anymore, I was thinking of just giving up, and then I realized, wait a minute, I could just be a musician. I used to be a musician. I could do that again." And yeah, Dylan is often mysterious and will say one thing one day, and another thing another day. But in terms of this project, that way of thinking about who he was just made a lot of sense.

I've thought of interviewing him at times and my whole thing is very few people ever talked to him about music. They talked to him about god or whatever. Politics. Nobody says, what do you like better, Martins or Gibsons.

Years ago I was chatting with Dave Alvin who'd just been playing with Dylan. And he said, "You know, he's a music nerd, he wants to talk about Ramblin' Thomas." He loves old records. He knows that stuff and he cares about it. So anyway, that was sort of, I feel like I understand and don't disagree with the people, who, I was at dinner a year or so ago with Christopher Ricks, and he said, "Frankly, I've never been particularly interested in the music." And you know, I get that. That's fine. I'm a guitar player. I just last week was sitting down with the *Freewheelin' Sessions* working out his guitar parts. They're all really simple, but boy, are they smart and tasteful. I mean *really, really* interesting smart playing. So that's where I come at it from. That's who, you know I'm a musician.